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ABSTRACT

Based on a sound conceptual, integrative and systematic framework, the present study examines the competencies counselors value and their perceived performance on each of the competencies. Specifically, the objectives of this study were (1) to develop a comprehensive set of counselor competencies; (2) to identify the competencies for which there is a high level of consensus of importance among counselors; (3) to determine the competencies for which there is a high level of consensus in terms of perceived competence; and (4) to study systematically the effects of variables such as: status, academic degree, years of professional experience, and theoretical orientation on the perceived importance and performance on each of the competencies. In general, results indicated that counselors give most importance to self awareness, personal characteristics, basic interpersonal skills and societal awareness. Their perception of their competence follows the same patterns. Results were discussed in terms of their implications for counselor training and current professional practices. (Author)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE EVALUATION OF COUNSELOR'S PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

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New directions in the evaluation of
counselor's professional competence

There has been increasing concern within the profession of counseling over the need to improve counselor and counseling effectiveness. A number of programs have pointed out the importance of identifying what counselors should be trained to do. Tiedeman (1967) suggested that counselor education must re-examine its own structures, its functions, its purposes, its goals, its relationships and its practices. Several recent articles have suggested a redefinition of the objectives of training programs based on real world data. Winborn, Hinds and Stewart (1971) believe little improvement will be made as long as counselor education programs stress the accumulation rather than the application of knowledge even though performance is the counselor "raison d'ētre". There is a need to determine the critical variables involved in professional competence.

Not long ago, Rogers' (1957) basic conditions of helping were the only specific competencies available. Some major contributions have been made in recent years, however, toward the identification, training, and assessment of important competencies. Carkhuff and his associates (Carkhuff, 1969a, b) have done extensive work with basic interpersonal skills. Ivey and his associates (1968) have develop systematic technologies for training procedures for training helpers under the label "microcounseling".

Hackney et Nye (1973) have prepared a helping model based on the work of Zimmer (1967) that they term a "discrimination" model. Kagan and his associates (1971) have elaborated a miscroskills approach to counselor training that focuses on a technique called "interpersonal process recall". These contributions, though valuable, are limited in scope.

It seems clear that we need to determine what competencies counselors need to possess in order to perform effectively. But the question is how to do so most effectively and efficiently. An analysis of the litterature indicates that the approaches to counselor competence are numerous and varied. Furthermore very little work has been done on the integrative dimensions of counselor competencies and on their systematic configuration. Generally, different theoretical groups or programs have emphasized some selected activities and given less attention to other competencies. Quite recently, Bernstein and Lecomte (1976) presented an integrative competence based model for counselor education. The model represents an important effort to define the common elements in counselor training and to integrate available theories, research, and methodology. The distinctive contribution of the model lies in its provision of a sound conceptual, integrative and systematic framework a) to determine the entire range of minimal competencies counselors must possess in order to perform effectively, b) to choose and develop procedures and methodologies for training in the

competencies, c) to select and develop valid and reliable method of assessing each of the necessary competencies.

In this context, the present study examined the competencies counselors value and their perceived performance on each of the competencies. Specifically the objectives of this study were a) to develop a comprehensive set of counselor competencies based on Menne's (1975) questionnaire, b) to identify the competencies for which there is a high level of consensus of importance among counselors, c) to determine the competencies for which there is a high level of consensus in terms of perceived competence among counselors, c) to study systematically the effects of variables such as 1) status, 2) highest degree on the perceived importance and performance on each of the competencies, 3) years of professional experience, and 4) theoretical orientation. Finally, the analysis of discrepancies between perceived importance and competence were studied in terms of the need of in-service-training or continuing education.

PROCEDURES

Subjects

A total of 139 subjects took part in this study. They belong to one of the four following categories: graduate students (N = 37), university professors or supervisors (N = 21), counseling psychologists (N = 50) and their employers (N = 31). The employers

represent different professions although most of them are counseling psychologists.

Variables

Four subjects or independent variables were analyzed in this research. Status (student, counseling psychologist, professor or employer) is the first of these variables. The second is the highest degree obtained in psychology: incomplete masters, maters, incomplete doctoral, doctoral. Years of experience represent the third independent variable and were broken into three categories: none, 1 to 5, and 6 or more. Finally, the subjects were classified according to their theoretical orientation in counseling: undefined, humanistic, eclectic.

Three sets of dependent variables were utilized in this study, each one containing twelve scores derived from a questionnaire filled by the subjects.

Instrument

The instrument used in this research is an adaptation of Menne's (1975) questionnaire. It contains 153 items refering to counselor skills, behavior, knowledge, traits etc... Using a 9 point Likert-type scale, the subject was asked 1) to indicate his perceived importance (I) of each item, and 2) to identify to what degree the item describes what he is, knows or does, in other words, his perceived level of competence (C).

Internal consistency analyses show highly acceptable alpha coefficients for each of the twelve following scales into which the original items were classified: 1. personal characteristics (I = .80, C = .83), 2. social awareness (I = .88, C = .87), 3. self awareness (I = .84, C = .82), 4. research skills (I = .91, C = .90), 5. theory (I = .80, C = .88), 6. basic interpersonal skills (I = .88, C = .92), 7. traditional skills (I = .87, C = .89) 8. vocational guidance (I = .81, C = .83), 9. training and supervision (I = .72, C = .82), 10. professional development (I = .76, C = .67), 11. evaluation skills (I = .84, C = .85), 12. ethical standards (I = .71, C = .73).

Intercorrelations between the twelve scales range from .14 to .83 on the dimension of importance (I) and from -.03 to .67 on the dimension of competence (C).

Factor analysis of the twelve scales shows the existence of two main factors. The first one, Practice, is composed of personal characteristics, self-awareness, basic interpersonal skills, traditional skills, training and supervision, ethical standards; the following scales appear on the second factor, Evaluation: social awareness, research, theory, guidance, evaluation skills.

Testing

The testing material, including the questionnaire and a document explaining the goal of the research, was sent by mail

in March 1976. The subjects were allowed a two week period to fill the questionnaire. After ten days, the subjects who had not returned the questionnaire were reached on the phone. The percentage of subjects thus tested attained 40%.

Statistical analysis

As mentioned before, three series of twelve scores were derived from the questionnaire: one for the importance (I), another for the perceived competence (C) and a third representing the difference between I and C.

One-way analyses of variance were conducted to establish the relation between the four independent variables and these three sets of scores. The Scheffé method of pairwise and multiple mean comparisons was utilized for each analysis in which significant differences were found.

Results

Because of space limitations, it is not possible to present the results of all the analyses of variance that were conducted The 153 competencies statements and their means and standard deviations, for example, are not presented. Instead, only those findings of most general interest, and those that take the least space are reported here.

Competencies counselors value

In general, counselors gave more importance to the scales of self-awareness, intervention skills, personal characteristics and basic interpersonal skills and less importance was given to vocational guidance, evaluation skills and research skills.

The analyses of variance conducted on each of the independent variables indicate that counselors in general value similarly the competencies presented (table 1). Nevertheless it is interesting to observe that employers gave less importance to the ethical standards than the counseling psychologists, the graduate students and the counselor educators ($p < .05$). In addition, subjets with more than 6 years of professional experience gave more importance to education in theory than the two other groups ($p < .05$). Finally, no significant differences were obtained among the theoretical orientations of the subjects.

Counselor's perceived competence

In general, counselors perceived themselves more competent on the scales of personal characteristics, self-awareness, basic interpersonal skills, professional development and ethical standards than in terms of social awareness, research skills, vocational guidance, training and supervision.

The analyses of variance indicated an impressive number of significant results (table 2). Major results on the four analyses

indicate that the degree of perceived competence varied systematically with the degree of subject qualifications. In addition, eclectic counselors perceived themselves as more competent in terms of research skills than those having other theoretical orientations. There were no significant differences between the humanistic counselors and the group without a specific orientation.

Discrepancy between perceived importance and competence

The discrepancy scores between perceived importance and competence were considered as an indication of need for the in-service-training or continuing education. The greatest discrepancies were found on the scales of training and supervision, intervention skills, research skills and education in theory.

The analyses of variance (table 3) indicate a number of significant results. In general, discrepancies are greater for graduate students, subjets with less professional experience than the other independent groups. In addition, eclectic counselors showed less discrepancy than those having other theoretical orientations.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was envisioned as an initial step toward the development of competency-based procedures for use in selection, training and evaluation of counselors or therapists. The 12 dimensions of counselor competency, as developped in this research, represent an effort to integrate and systematize the evaluation and development

of professional competence. It would seem that the 3 dimensions of counselor functioning identified by Bernstein and Lecomte (1976) provide a meaningful context for the 12 factors of competency of the present study.

The present study raised some questions about the relative importance placed on various competencies. For instance, the findings indicate that counselors don't consider evaluation, research and social concerns as essential in their functioning. The significant differences discovered in the relative importance and the perceived competence of these competencies, depending on the theoretical orientation, academic degree, professional experience, and status have some implications for counselor education programs.

This study represents an effort to study systematically basic dimensions of counselor functioning and their configuration with real world data in terms of competencies counselors value, self-evaluation on these competencies and a measure of need for in-service-training through a discrepancy score between the importance score and the competence score. Its multiple-variable format also adds a new contribution to recent research done on this theme.

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Table 1

One-way analysis of variance for the independent variables on the competencies counselor value

Independent variables	N	df	F RATIOS											
			1- personal characteristics	2- social awareness	3- self awareness	4- research skills	5- theory	6- basic inter-personal skills	7- traditional skills	8- vocational guidance	9- training and supervision	10- professional development	11- evaluation skills	12- ethical standards
Status	138	3/134	0.52	1.24	2.98*	0.57	0.94	1.49	0.56	0.80	0.85	2.70*	1.84	2.47
Highest diploma	125	3/121	0.54	2.79*	1.91	0.84	0.31	1.79	0.60	3.01*	1.50	2.09	0.50	1.28
Experience	139	2/136	0.32	1.01	0.11	2.02	3.32*	0.41	0.06	1.30	0.42	0.17	1.59	5.06**
Approach	116	2/113	1.14	0.29	0.49	0.31	0.26	1.01	0.13	0.16	0.27	0.25	0.29	0.81

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 2

One-way analysis of variance for the independent variables on the counselor's perceived competence

Independent variables	N	df	F RATIOS											
			1- personal characteristics	2- social awareness	3- self awareness	4- research skills	5- theory	6- basic inter-personal skills	7- traditional skills	8- vocational guidance	9- training and supervision	10- professional development	11- evaluation skills	12- ethical standards
Status	122	3/118	2.26	1.32	1.71	1.90	2.47	3.18*	4.90**	0.63	7.88**	3.60*	1.88	2.74*
Highest diploma	119	3/115	1.96	1.58	0.31	4.44**	4.00**	1.57	3.21*	2.81*	8.58**	3.24*	0.74	5.29**
Experience	123	2/120	4.69**	1.12	0.60	7.97**	4.39*	3.13*	5.81**	0.15	15.30**	7.69**	0.39	5.77**
Approach	111	2/108	4.54*	2.16	4.31*	4.37*	5.53**	4.56*	4.30*	1.98	4.98**	2.02	2.27	2.10

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

Table 3

One-way analysis of variance for the independent variables on the discrepancy between perceived importance and competence

Independent variables	N	df	F RATIOS											
			1- personal characteristics	2- social awareness	3- self awareness	4- research skills	5- theory	6- basic interpersonal skills	7- traditional skills	8- vocational guidance	9- training and supervision	10- professional development	11- evaluation skills	12- ethical standards
Status	122	3/118	2.88*	4.35**	3.96**	1.49	1.30	5.56**	4.59**	2.21	7.29**	6.69**	0.85	0.59
Highest diploma	119	3/115	2.77**	5.86**	2.13	5.38**	4.07**	5.61**	7.51**	3.60*	14.23**	8.87**	0.99	1.62
Experience	121	2/118	3.11*	5.85**	2.88	3.61*	0.97	4.52*	6.69**	2.14	12.40**	9.67**	0.95	0.37
Approach	111	2/108	5.36**	1.32	6.¢0**	3.75*	5.08**	5.75**	6.70**	1.55	6.34**	3.07*	3.86*	0.25

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$